

Portrayal and Preservation of Indigenous Methods of Visual Communication through Indian Museums

Supreo Chanda

The tradition of using visual appeal for conveying profound cultural message is a typically Indian achievement as evidenced in the potteries, sculptures, temple reliefs, literature, paintings, dances, dramas, etc. through the ages and can be found in every corner of the country. The relief sculptures on the relics of early *stupas*, murals on the walls of ancient rock-cut edifices or the rich medieval temple architectures give captivating glimpses of the Indian life in the past.

The pre-Indus potteries in the hill-slope villages of Baluchistan (Fig. 1.) are typified by series of horizontal



Fig. 1. Prehistoric potteries of Indus Valley and Baluchistan.

horizontal panel or frame to accommodate illustrations of plant and animals. These horizontal bands on the round potteries present the visual image in a system of continuous or recurrent presence. It may be relevant to recall here that in modern exhibition techniques, the horizontal arrangement at the eye-level is a basic method of widest application.

Potteries found from the flood plains of the Indus (Fig. 2.) show a system of making a design based on



Fig. 2. Pottery fragments from Mohenjo-daro.

interesting circles, which is most sophisticated and geometrically accomplished. Apart from these,

potteries with peepul leaves occasionally with small birds sitting on the branches are also found. The Cemetery 'H' fuminary potteries show horizontal orientations of illustration of a series of peacocks. Again from the pottery illustrations recovered from Lothal of slightly later period, the emergence of beautiful line drawings of deer oriented and adjusted within the horizontal frame can be seen.

The typical Indus valley seals (Fig. 3.) are square in character and always show, in astonishing details,



Fig. 3. Pre-historic Indus Seals.

immaculate adjustments of animal figures and human visages in both geometric and realistic representation. Here abstract summarisations of pictographic writing are cleverly adjusted with animal, human and plant life. In a modern exhibition, this type of adjustment is desired in the display composed of pictorial illustrations and highly sophisticated verbal symbols in the form of labels. It must be noted here that in none of the seals of Indus valley, the pictograms eclipsed the importance of the visual appeal of pictorial subjects - a thing, which is always tried to follow in modern displays where the designer would not like to overshadow pictorial objects by superimposing verbal symbols.

During the early historic period, some aspects of Bharhut *stupa* railing and *torana* illustrations are truly astounding and surprisingly modern in basic approach. Bharhut panels show different aspects of Buddha's life and stories from *Jatakas*. These stories and other episodes of Buddhist religion are adjusted either within square or circular frames on pillar uprights (*thavas*) and horizontal bars (*suchis*). Many of these illustrations in relief are supplied with inscriptions in Brahmi characters conveying to the visiting public the names of the stories so depicted. It is notable that in Indian custom pilgrims going to pay their homage to a *stupa* used to go around the whole edifice. This is known as circumambulation or *pradakshina* in technical terms, for which *pradakshinapathas* or pathways of going round a structure were provided. It can be visualised that thousands of common Indians, lettered and

unlettered, visiting the great *stupa* - eagerly looking at and enjoying illustrations, which were from time to time explained to them by their enlightened brethren.

It is eminently notable that these labelled illustrations of Bharhut are always displayed within the span of eye-level viewing, i.e., an area roughly between two and seven feet from the ground level in height. This area, even after the passage of twenty-two centuries, remains the most valuable display area throughout the world. It is again notable that the Bharhut inscriptional labels are never obtrusive, but placed in such a way that they are practically difficult to be overlooked by the visitors. This is the same purpose for which labelling in exhibitions are utilised.

The relief work on the vertical and horizontal elements of the gate of the Sanchi-*stupa* (Fig. 4.) is the ideal example of *charana-chitras* of the Buddhist period. These vertically and horizontally oriented panels depicting stories are surprisingly similar to the *patanchitras* (scroll-painting on clothes or paper) of West Bengal, which are still very much in existence. "The gateways are perhaps more noteworthy for their carved ornamentation than their architecture" (Basham 1981: 351ff).



Fig. 4. Gateway of Sanchi Stupa.

The remains of the royal portrait gallery showing royalty and other notables of the Kushan period are to be looked into. Antiquities from Mathura are extremely important in this regard. The archaeological information again copiously supported by the detailed description of *Pratima Natakam* by the famous classical Indian poet and dramatist Bhāsa. From this dramatic account, it is known that ancestral portrait galleries were kept in ancient India and these galleries were provided with a proper arrangement of staff like the keeper and the cleaner.

It may be pertinent to note here that similar creation of dramatic moments by using the then existing visual methods can also be found in other classical Indian literatures like Banbhattacha's *Harshacharita*, Vishakhadatta's *Mudrarakashasha* and Bhababhuti's *Uttararamacharita*, etc. These prove the importance of visual communication in ancient Indian society. In Kautilya's *Arthashastra* separate provisions had been made for the professional communicators like the *shoubhanikas* and the *vagjibanas*.

Many of the amusements of ancient India were provided by professional entertainers. As well as who

practised highly developed arts such as drama, music and dancing, there were others who travelled through town and village, diverting the ordinary folk who could not fully appreciate the nuances of the more sophisticated art forms (Basham 1981: 211 – 212).

In the Hindu temples, in its wide distribution in the Gangetic plains, Orissa, Central India, Northern and North-western India, most judicious use of temples for visual communication can be witnessed. The North Indian or *nagara* temples are generally typified by sculptural illustrations in the lower and middle heights more or less covering the *pabhaga* and *jangha* areas. In this area, within horizontal mouldings, are placed illustrations from various aspects of life at large, which are repeatedly seen and enjoyed, by the masses of pilgrims who used to visit the temple.

What is true for the North is also valid in the case of the *Dravida* structures. Starting from the monolithic *Ratha*

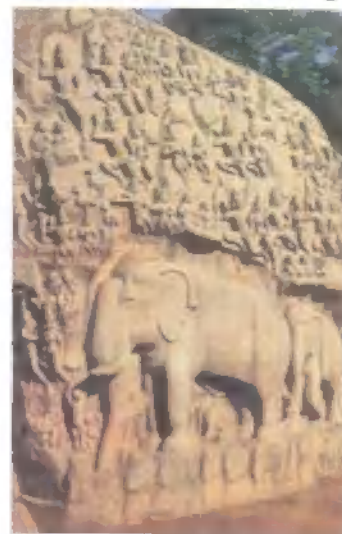


Fig. 5. Arjuna's Penance at Mahabalipuram.

temples of Mahabalipuram (Fig. 5.), one comes across royal portraiture, hunting scenes, pastoral life and marches of war depicted beautifully in horizontal orientation. Examples of this type of visual adjustment are too numerous to be noted. Some of the best examples come from the edifices of Belur and Halebid in Karnataka and Amaravati and Nagarjunakonda in Andhra Pradesh, among others.

The temples of Ahichhatra, Bhitargaon and structures at Kausambi, Paharpur, Mynamati, etc., belonging from 4th century AD to the end of the early medieval period, show the same use as expressed above in the form of architectural terracotta panels. There are temples, *stupas*, and other architectural structures also in this group.

The stuccowork of North-western India and Nalanda also made beautiful use of the above method; so also the wooden panels in the South Indian and Deccan temple carts.

The late medieval terracotta temples of Bengal deserve special mention in this regard. The terracotta panels in these temples, especially in Bankura-Bishnupur (Fig. 6.), beautifully depict mythological scenes from the *Ramayana* and the *Puranas* relating to the Vaishnavite tradition, royal court sceneries, hunting scenes, life of common people, etc (Fig. 7.).



Fig. 6. Jor-Bangla Temple at Bishnupur.



Fig. 7. Scenes on the walls of Jor-Bangla Temple.

From the domain of archaeology, architecture and literature, if attention is turned to the visual art, the urge of people to communicate visually even in the pre-historic times can be found. The pre-historic rock-shelter paintings of Bhimbetka (Fig. 8.) and related other sites beautifully depict the abundance of wild life, dancing scenes, etc. in simply drawn lines in almost continuous succession in terms of time, which give a fair idea about the life and rituals of the pre-historic men.



Fig. 8. Pre-historic Rock Painting at Bhimbetka Caves.

Efforts for communication through visual representation for educational purposes have been successfully made through the cave wall paintings of Ajanta. There *Jataka* stories have been conveyed through the murals. Paintings on the walls of the Bagh caves show resemblances to the later Ajanta paintings. This tradition of wall painting continued to the Hindu temples at Badami, Jaina site at Sittannavasal, Tirumalaipuram cave temple, Kailasa temple at Ellora, the early mediaeval temples under the Cholas in Tamil Nadu, temples in Mysore (Karnataka) and Kerala.

The tradition of visual communication has been successfully continued in the form of miniature paintings

on palm-leaf or paper. Illustrated Buddhist palm-leaf manuscripts, Jaina palm-leaf or handmade paper manuscripts on the lives of Mahavira and other Jaina saints are examples of such endeavour. Wooden covers of the manuscripts also used to bear illustrations sometimes. The method of palm-leaf illustration was perfected later in Orissa. Even now the art of painting on palm-leaf is thriving in Orissa. There has been a rich tradition of miniature paintings in India as witnessed in different schools of such paintings like the paintings under the Sultanate, Mughal paintings, Rajasthani paintings and Pahari paintings. The famous miniatures of the *Ragamala* series are the unique renditions of the *ragas* of the Hindusthani classical music.

The *kohbar* (nuptial chamber) paintings done by the women of the Madhuban area of Bihar are examples of use of visual communication. Ritual floor designs done by the women of different parts of India like *alpana* of Bengal, *mandana* of Rajasthan, *muggu* of Andhra Pradesh, *kolam* of Kerala, etc. are highly symbolic and communicative. Similar instances can be seen in traditional textile designs and motifs also, e.g., Chamba *rumal*, *kantha* of Bengal, etc. The temple hangings that are painted on clothes, such as *kalamkari* of Andhra Pradesh and *pichhwai* of Nathdwara of Rajasthan may be mentioned here.

Most of the Indian traditional dances use intricate facial, postural and hand symbols to express different emotions. Use of visual symbols is very much in practice in traditional iconography. Even the Hindu priests use a lot of symbolic hand-gestures during performing *pujas*.

There are hundreds of highly communicative traditional performing arts still extant in India. These include scroll paintings like *patachitra* of Bengal (Fig.9.), *pad* of Rajasthan; theatrical arts like *Kuchipudi* of Andhra Pradesh, *Ankiya-nat* of Assam, *Seraikela Chhau* of Bihar (Jharkhand), *Bhavai* of Gujarat, *Kariyala* of Himachal Pradesh, *Bhand Pathar* of Jammu & Kashmir, *Yakshagana* of Karnataka, *Koodiyattam*, *Mudiyettu*, *Chavittu Natakam*, *Kathakali* of Kerala, *Maanch* of Madhya Pradesh, *Tamasha* of Maharashtra, *Jatra* of Orissa & West Bengal, *Mayurbhanj Chhau* of Orissa, *Naqal* of Punjab & Haryana, *Khyal* of



Fig. 9. Pata-Chitra of West Bengal.

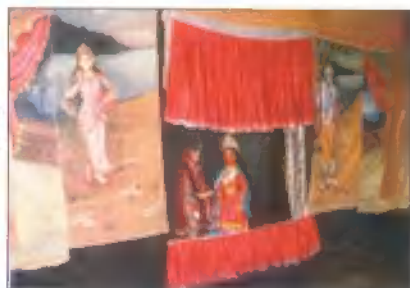
Rajasthan, *Therukoothu*, *Kavadi* of Tamil Nadu, *Nautanki*, *Ram Leela*, *Ras Leela* of Uttar Pradesh, *Purulia Chhau* of West Bengal, etc.; Ballad forms like *Alah-Udal* of Bundelkhand of Madhya Pradesh, *Pandavani* of Madhya Pradesh (Chhattisgarh), *Povada*, *Lavani* of Maharashtra, etc.; Story telling forms like *Kathakata* of West Bengal (Fig.10),



Fig. 10. Kathakata of West Bengal.

Dasakathia of Orissa, *Burrakatha* of Andhra Pradesh, etc.; Marionettes of West Bengal (Fig. 11.), Andhra

Fig. 11. Marionette of West Bengal.



Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka, Maharashtra and Rajasthan; Rod Puppets of West Bengal (Fig. 12.) and Orissa; Glove puppets of West Bengal (Fig. 13.); Shadow plays of Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Karnataka; Portable shrine of Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh; etc., and many more.



Fig. 12. Rod Puppet of West Bengal.



Fig. 13. Glove Puppetry of West Bengal.

Though the traditional forms have been displayed as exhibits or objects of curiosity, no serious attempt has been made to utilise their vast communication potentialities. Most of the Indian traditional methods have the flexibility to modify as per the need of the target-audience. Presently almost all forms of traditional performing arts are being used for the rural folks only. Urban people probably would not like the unchanged crude forms unless those are refined to some extent. It is also not much needed to use traditional methods for the educated urban masses because there are many other modes; moreover the education system of present-day India is also Westernised, hence for the educated people the Western educational methods would not be difficult to understand. The rural folk and the low-income group of urban community do like the traditional forms of education and entertainment very much. The traditional forms are primarily meant for the adults, but the children also enjoy - they may not understand the intricate subject matters - the colourful costumes, background and movements with musical accompaniments simply fascinate them and definitely provoke their imagination.

A devotion to the dead past and the dying culture in the name of 'continuity' and 'speciality' is not the desideratum... It is imperative that Indian art should wean away from ideational stage formed in the name of ancient spirituality as well as medieval mysticism which is the by-product of foreign subjugation, and look into the socio-economic changes that through the forces of Historical Materialism are rapidly taking place (Datta 1956: 100-101).

Traditional methods can be employed in the day-to-day museum educational programmes with a little imagination. As for example, the portable shrine of Rajasthan (*kavad*), which opens frontally part by part thereby gradually unfolding and opening out the picture legend drawn inside, and the painted wooden wedding chest of Orissa can be judiciously used in making the School Loan Kits. Likewise story-telling forms can be incorporated in the story sessions in the children's programmes. Other forms may also be used in one way or other. At least these can be used to attract visitors to the exhibitions and programmes.

The age-old display techniques, like the judicious use of back lighting employed in the shadow puppet performances or in the *Pad* demonstration in the desert under dark night sky; or use of diffused natural light in the old temples and shrines; or the gradual unfolding of *Patachitras* with the progress of narration; etc. should be investigated and made use of. The display techniques employed in the village markets and fairs

may also be noticed taking cognisance of the elaborate arrangements of the merchandise, positions of the trader and customers, etc.

In India, agriculture and religion played most important role in shaping up the traditional art forms.

Community's own channels for communication are likely to be more effective for disseminating messages. These channels are popularly known as traditional or folk media. The terms 'folk', 'traditional' and 'indigenous' generally refer to the aspects of culture found in peasants and rural people (Das 1992: 44).

Kings, feudal lords and the religious heads readily understood its potentiality and patronised the artist(s) and successfully utilised their services to disseminate desired messages to the people at large.

Traditional folk media should not be confused with the technology-based mass media. The technology-based mass media disseminate messages to heterogeneous audiences, whereas the traditional folk media cater to the ethno-rural communities through the functional role of folklore. The folklore phenomenon represents an act of communication employing vocal, verbal-musical and visual art forms, transmitted to a society or a group of societies from one generation to another. They are indigenous modes and have served the society as tools of communication for ages. They have been integrated in the complex body of the socio-cultural behaviour, determined by anthropomorphic existence of the people to which they belong (Parmar 1994: 21-22).

With the change of the feudal system the traditional forms lost their patrons. Moreover in this era of commoditisation of ethnicity, the traditional arts are fast losing their character and efficiency to suit the tastes of few rich ethno-manics who are also self-proclaimed guardians of ethnic art. In this grim situation the agencies, which were supposed to look after the originality of the traditional arts, have been either unable to cope up with the necessary demands or succumbed to the pressure of the neo-riches to dance in tune with them. Therefore the only option left to preserve the rich heritage of Indian traditional art perhaps is to use them in the more organised and able sector of Indian museums. By doing such, the dual purpose of making museums more effective and preserving an integral part of the cultural heritage would be served, more so because, "It shall be duty of every citizen of India to value and preserve the rich heritage of our composite culture" (Constitution of India, under Fundamental Duties).

In another important development the *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Heritage*, adopted by the UNESCO General Conference in Paris on 17th October 2003, which came into force on 20th April 2006. India is one of the major signatory countries. The exceptionally rapid ratification of this new instrument that came into force in just two and half years amply shows the great interest in protection of intangible heritage all over the world irrespective of the countries of the South or of the North. It was really necessary legally to have an instrument to combat the threat posed by the Globalisation to safeguard this essential aspect of cultural diversity, which is inherited through tradition. The countries ratifying the Convention commit themselves to take necessary measures to safeguard the intangible heritage on their territory and also to make detailed inventories of the forms extant there. The Convention aims to prepare two lists:

1. Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, and
2. List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding.

The International Council of Museums (ICOM) fully ratified the Convention. India being one of the *hotspots* of the cultural diversity and the museums portraying majority of the heritage, the Indian museums have great responsibilities in fulfilling the objective of the Convention, especially in the areas of raising public awareness.

Conservation policies were supposed to be based on critical process starting with 'intrinsic cultural resources and values' related to it. What were these intrinsic values? All along they were considered to be four i.e.: 'material', 'workmanship', 'design', and 'setting'. The primary aim of conservation was to 'safeguard the quality and values of the resource, protect material substance and ensure integrity for posterity' (Fielden and Jokiletho 1993: 11). But could that be all? (Munjeri 2004: 12-13).

To make museums more effective, educationally as well as culturally, such institutions in India perhaps can adopt the traditional visual techniques used in many of its cultural heritage forms, efficacy of which are time-tested, and could run the educational/extension services in such a manner that people naturally feel attracted to visit museums as national institutions for acquiring knowledge and enjoyment. Intangible elements can also effectively fill the gaps between the evidences of material culture, i.e., the objects.

No one could boldly assert that the soul (the intangible) can exist without the body (the tangible) and thus it can be argued philosophically and perhaps logically that the intangible and the tangible are two sides of the same coin... the accepted conclusions of the UNESCO World Commission on Culture and Development which unequivocally states that in any partnership of the tangible and the intangible, 'The tangible can only be interpreted through the intangible' and not vice versa (Munjeri 2000).

Intangible elements are indispensable in supplementing the tangible elements preserved in the museums. Thereby the Indian museums can develop a separate national character and identity.

Traditional art forms have survived for centuries and they will survive in the future due to their flexibility. They could be the media for social change in rural India. Folk arts being functional, interpersonal and having a contextual base would be able to carry the message of change, development and environmental awareness... (Mukhopadhyay 1994: 3-4).

Museology, may be defined as, the philosophy of visual interpretation of heritage, be it cultural, natural or scientific (Chanda 2008: 21-25). Again, visual culture has emerged across a range of disciplines, including art history, film studies, comparative literature, anthropology and museology, as well as regional and cultural studies. The visible artefact arises out of a set of social and cultural exigencies that create the conditions for seeing that fit into a meaningful structure of information and knowledge.

The concept of 'visual culture' allows the examination of all those signifying practices, representations and mediations that pertain to looking and seeing, and allows an analysis that is not shaped in advance by the values of high culture. 'Visual culture' as a concept and a methodology refuses to accept the distinction between high and mass culture (Hooper-Greenhill 2000: 14).

Tony Bennett (1995: 163), quoting *Grundrisse*, by Karl Marx, explains the dialectics between production of art and production of aesthetics. Eileen Hooper-Greenhill (2000: 1), again, relates the interpretation of visual culture to museum pedagogy:

In asking questions about the interpretation of visual culture in museums the themes of narrative, difference, and identity arise in relation to interpretive processes and museum pedagogy. These are complex and multi-layered matters, where meanings rooted in the past clash with contemporary interpretations that challenge their continued validity.

By definition, museum is a non-profit, permanent institution **in the service of society** and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the **tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment** for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment (Article 3, Section 1 of the *ICOM Statutes*, adopted by the 22nd General Assembly at Vienna, Austria on 24th August 2007).

One of the prime functions of the public museum is to present material culture to be viewed... In the museums, objects, or artefacts are put on display. They are there to be looked at (Hooper-Greenhill 2000: 14).

Susane M Pearce (1992: 139-141) describes the process that transforms 'material' into 'museum collection' based on Saussurian semiotic insights.

The concept of intangible heritage, cultural expression, etc., may not be alien to the Indian museums; but to include them in the core functioning of the museums would be a very challenging proposition. Each and every convention, declaration, etc., concerning culture, tangible or intangible, does emphasize on documentation, education and raising awareness among the public for preservation and revitalisation, wherever needed, which constitute the vital activities of museums. In the very near future, preservation of digital heritage will definitely be making its foray into the domain of museums and Museology. Museums have to play greater roles in portraying and preservation of culture and heritage in holistic manners to build up cultural identities in global perspective. Indian museums must come forward to accept the challenge to integrate culture for sustainable development. Cultural plurality of the Indian society makes the task more daunting; at the same time it must be utilised for fruitful interaction between the varied cultures for making the bridges among people for fostering mutual understanding and respect. Museums are the ideal launching pads for creating ambience for such dialogues with the potential tools at their disposal. Institutions imparting Museology training cannot, however, shirk off their responsibilities; an Inclusive Museology curriculum should be devised especially considering and taking care of the unique cultural complexities of the Indian society.

Such actions may give impetus to the preservation and rejuvenation of the threatened existence of the forms. It is possible to document the authentic forms; at the same time, controlled trials may be designed to evolve suitable application for the modern Indian museums. Besides the above, more importantly, it may help in

preparing the *Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity*, and the *List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding*, in respect of India, as stipulated in the *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Heritage*, 2003.

The result of such efforts would help the museums to utilise the traditional forms for the betterment of the museums' programmes. On the other hand, the traditional forms may get new suitable patron, which are vital for their existence and preservation for posterity.

Folk customs which have survived into the modern era are now maintained largely to assert a (mostly specious) local independence in an age in which local identity of any kind is threatened by mass culture, and most other links of memory and tradition with the past have been cut. Museums are perhaps the last non-partisan public institutions which can re-establish those links and that identity as such they have a role to play in maintaining public symbols of local identity, when they persist, helping to keep them alive, and documenting the changes in them as their meaning changes (Rattue 1996: 225).

At the end it must be mentioned that the Birla Industrial & Technological Museum (BITM), Kolkata often uses such media in its various extension programmes, such as inviting scroll-painters (patuas) during International Environment Day (Fig. 14.). Such examples are fit to be imitated.



Fig. 14. Patuas at work.

References

1. Basham, A. L. 1981 (25th impression 1995). *The Wonder that was India*. New Delhi & Calcutta: Rupa & Co.
2. Bennett, Tony. 1995. *The Birth of the Museum*. London and New York: Routledge.
3. Chanda, Supreo. 2008. *Inclusive Museology – Call of the Day for a Multi-Cultural Country like India*. Journal of Indian Museums. Vol. L XI. New Delhi: Museums Association of India.
4. Das, Varsha. 1992. *Traditional Performing Arts: Potential for Scientific Temper*. New Delhi: Wiley Eastern Ltd.
5. Datta, Bhupendranath. 1956 (1978 Reprint). *Indian Art in Relation to Culture*. Calcutta: Nababharat Publishers.
6. Fielden, B. M. and Jokiletho, J. 1993. *Management Guidelines for World Cultural Heritage Sites*. Paris: ICCROM. ICOMOS. UNESCO.
7. Hooper-Greenhill, Eilean. 2000. *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture*. London & New York: Routledge.
8. Mukhopadhyay, Durgadas. 1994. *Folk Arts and Social Communication*. New Delhi: Publications Division. Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India.
9. Munjeri, Dawson. 2000. *Intangible heritage in Africa: could it be a case of 'much ado about nothing'?*, ICOMOS Newsletter, March-July (www.international.icomos.org/munjeri_eng.htm, accessed on 10th May 2011).
10. Munjeri, Dawson. 2004. *Tangible and Intangible Heritage: from difference to convergence*. Museum International. Vol. 56, No. 1-2. Paris: UNESCO.
11. Parmar, Shyam. 1994. *Traditional Folk Media in India*. 2nd Edition. New Delhi: Research Press.
12. Pearce, Susane M. 1992. *Museums, Objects and Collections: A Cultural Study*. Leicester and London: Leicester University Press.
13. Rattue, James. 1996. *History and Folklore*. Kavanah, Gaynor (Ed.). *Making Histories in Museums*. London and New York: Leicester University Press.



Supreo Chanda, Associate Professor and Head of Museology, University of Calcutta, Kolkata.
supreochanda@yahoo.com